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Lifestyle, aesthetics and narrative in luxury domain advertising

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This study investigates a pattern observed in recent lifestyle advertisements. In the domain of luxury goods a certain type of advertisement has emerged that relies almost exclusively on the evocation of pure sensation. Only in part do the depicted scenes, characters or objects trigger these sensations. Rather, aesthetic features of style – such as depth of field, diffusion, colour or light – enhance the spectator's sensorial response. In the context of the avant-garde of the 1920s, similar strategies were employed. While these avant-garde films combined a modernist hope for utopia with a democratisation of aesthetics and taste for the masses, contemporary lifestyle advertisements tend to be suffused with nostalgia. However, this nostalgia is ahistoric, offering only the most pleasurable aspects of an imaginary experience.

In his 1964 essay *Rhetoric of the Image* (*Rhétorique de l'image*), Roland Barthes analysed the three messages at work in an advertisement for the pasta brand Panzani: 'a linguistic message, a coded iconic message and a non-coded iconic message' (1977: 36). In the linguistic domain Barthes discovered a double communication in the name Panzani, which denotes a (France-based) food company while at the same time – by its assonance – evoking a culturally coded connotation he called 'Italianicity' (1977: 34). On the level of the pictorial representation the coded iconic message carries a number of connotations: freshness, expressed by the depiction of the half-opened bag; Italianicity, with the vegetables and the 'tri-coloured hues'; 'the idea of a total culinary service' with 'the serried collection' of all the objects necessary 'for a carefully balanced dish'; and finally the *nature morte* (still life) with its tradition in painting and photography (1977: 34–35). Each of these connotations requires specific knowledge to be deciphered, knowledge that is culturally coded to various degrees. While some components of this knowledge stem from simple everyday experience, others are based on a broader cultural context formed by the history of a given society. In his collection of texts published in *Mythologies* (1973), Barthes described such formations of higher order signs as 'myths'. They are a 'contingent, historical, in one word: fabricated, quality' (1973: 143), co-present but hidden in the depiction. This notion is in perfect accordance with the exchange of symbolic values that permeates consumer goods in a modern and postmodern society as proposed by both Chaney (1996) and Featherstone (2007).

Therefore Italianicity requires a stereotyped image of Italian culture as constructed by foreigners and their tourist experience, be it personal or mediated through magazines, films or advertisements. The more this quality is established, the more it becomes transparent and thus ideologically charged on a very subliminal level, or, as Barthes put it, 'Bourgeois ideology ... turns culture into nature' (1973: 206). It requires a hegemonial reading to uncover its ideological effect. As with Fredric Jameson's notion of pastiche, it is the wearing of a mask that informs a neutral-seeming practice of mimicry (Jameson, 1984: 17).

According to Barthes it is especially the mechanical and thus objective status of photographic depiction – the photograph as a non-coded message – that enhances the myth of naturalness, because by its tight coupling with the depicted world it naturalises the symbolic layers of meaning. Furthermore, it is on the level of style that human interventions manifest themselves and a shift from the natural to the culturally coded occurs, thus triggering another layer of meaning. It was this notion of style that Barthes (2004: 47) described as the 'third' or 'obtuse' meaning. The term 'meaning' is – as Kristin Thompson (1999: 488) notes – actually 'a misleading one, since these elements of the work are precisely those that do not participate in the creation of narrative or symbolic meaning'. Rather it 'frustrates meaning – subverting not the content but the entire practice of meaning' (Barthes, 1973: 49).

It is exactly this shift from denotation to connotation and obtuse meaning, or – to put it differently – from information to sensorial and affective qualities that is the topic of this discussion. In the luxury domain in recent years, a certain type of advertisement has emerged that relies almost exclusively on the evocation of pure sensations. Only in part do the depicted scenes, characters or objects lead to these sensations. Rather, the aesthetic features of style – such as depth of field, diffusion, colour or light – enhance the spectator's sensorial response. Most often, these types of advertisements understate the brand's account to the degree of showing the product only incidentally, usually dimly lit, in fragments and/or out of focus, while barely mentioning the brand's or product's name. In addition, the images are usually accompanied only by music, with little or no spoken word and no sound effects, which stresses the dreamlike quality already present in the photography that is often supported by the use of slow motion. The following analysis focuses on these strategies.

Emblematic of this type of advertising is a commercial for Louis Vuitton luggage entitled 'Louis Vuitton – A Journey',¹ produced in 2007 by the Ogilvy and Mather agency in Paris (directed by Bruno Aveillan with Philippe Le Sourd as

1. See internet sources for these commercials at the end of the text.

director of photography). Similar commercials were produced for BMW ('The Follow', produced in 2001, directed by Wong Kar-wai with Clive Owen); for Philips ('There's Only One Sun', produced in 2007, directed by Wong Kar-wai); for Tourism Australia ('Australia Walkabout', produced in 2008, directed by Baz Luhrmann); for Chanel No 5 ('N° 5 the Film', produced in 2004, directed by Baz Luhrmann, with Nicole Kidman and Rodrigo Santoro); for Dior Midnight Poison (produced in 2007, directed by Wong Kar-wai with Eva Green); for Gucci by Gucci (directed by David Lynch); for J'Adore by Dior (with Charlize Theron); for Rouge by Dior (with Monica Bellucci); for Gucci Jewellery (with Drew Barrymore); and for Coco Mademoiselle (with Keira Knightley), to name a few. All these commercials share similar aesthetic features. They represent a certain lifestyle – a distinctive 'form of status grouping' (Chaney, 1996: 14) – rather than a consumer's immediate benefit. Perfume is arguably the most prevalent product segment that applies these strategies to express a cross-modal relationship between a scent and its visual representation.

Avant-garde

Before analysing the aesthetic principles of contemporary lifestyle advertisements, it is worth examining a historical period during which similar patterns emerged in audiovisual forms that relied heavily or exclusively on the use of connotations. In the 1920s, a film-making avant-garde in Germany – including film-makers such as Walther Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger, Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter – created what was called *der absolute Film*, or 'absolute film' (cf. Brinckmann, 1997; Agde, 1998; Hake, 2004). At the centre of this movement was a close investigation into the relationship between the organisational principles of music and their implementation in the pictorial composition of pure forms. While – as Hake (2004: 193) has stated – there is still a tendency to establish a discursive dichotomy between consumer culture and the elitist thoughts of avant-garde movements, it should be stressed that both share a common rhetoric of innovation and progress. Furthermore, it was precisely this intellectual reflection about the status of art vis-à-vis everyday life that called for a tight bond between the two and led to the goal of an *Aesthetisierung des Alltags* (aestheticisation of everyday life) in the context of the Weimar Republic.

One of the central aims of Bauhaus culture was to apply high standards of design to ordinary consumer goods in order to democratise the exquisite taste formerly reserved for the upper class. Walter Benjamin discussed this development in a broader context in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of

Mechanical Reproduction', in which he argued that mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the formerly unique work of art and thus, for the first time in history, 'emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual' (Benjamin, 1979: 224) It is precisely in the dissemination of mechanically reproduced artworks that quantity leads to the quality of a modern society, thereby gaining a new politically relevant status. In contrast to the 'pure' art of former centuries, it affords modern artworks a social function for the masses.

Given these ideological premises it is no surprise that the avant-garde filmmakers mentioned above were deeply involved in establishing a modernist tradition of advertisement that relied on purely or at least heavily abstracted patterns. From the early 1910s the German film producer Julius Pinschewer sought to establish new forms of expression in advertisement and succeeded in collaborating with some of the most innovative film technicians and filmmakers. With Guido Seeber he produced the groundbreaking commercial 'Du musst zur KIPHO' in 1925 for the Kino- und Photoausstellung (Film and Photo Exhibition) in Berlin, a film that combined different materials to evoke an associative reading similar to Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (USSR, 1929). In a similar fashion, Hans Richter arranged images from an illustrated magazine with film images in his 'Zweigroschenzauber' ('Two-pence magic', 1929), a commercial for the *Kölnische Illustrierte Zeitung*. Richter called this form of animation with live-action footage *visueller Reim* (visual rhyme) because it depended on arrangements based on visual similarities.²

Probably the first commercial to make use of the newly invented principle of abstract composition was Walther Ruttmann's 'Der Sieger', produced by Julius Pinschewer in 1922 for Excelsior tyres, where he adopted many ideas and motifs already present in his 1921 abstract work *Opus 1*. 'Der Sieger' was shot in black and white, coloured by combining toning with hand-colouring (cf Brinckmann, 1997: 263). Oskar Fischinger's 'Kreise', produced in 1933 for TOLIRAG (Ton- und Lichtspiel-Reklame AG) in colour on Gasparcolor, showed a series of moving circles perfectly synchronised with music composed by Richard Wagner and Edvard Grieg, the circles intertwining and dissolving, with each image painted in colour.³

2. For the relationship between poetics and animation see Vimenet, 2003.

3. The claim '*Alle Kreise erfasst TOLIRAG*' (all [social] spheres are covered by TOLIRAG) was only loosely associated with the purely abstract composition. The company even allowed its clients to use the commercial for their own purposes, and the film was often shown as an independent piece (Agde, 1998: 90). More information about 'Kreise' and its production process is shown in the film historical documentary 'Film ist Rhythmus – Werbefilm und Avantgarde', directed by Martin Loiperdinger and Harald Pulch, Germany 1991.

These films share some common traits with the lifestyle advertisements, primarily in their lack of specific information, the loose connection to the product and their obvious exposure of style and pure aesthetic qualities. It will be the aim of the following analysis to discuss the various aspects of this relationship, as well as the differences, in detail.

Case study

More than eighty years later, it is not so much a utopian use of technical innovations that marks the current trend in lifestyle advertisement, but – on a deeper level – an aestheticisation of everyday experience that connects the commercials discussed here to the avant-garde movement of the 1920s. In postmodernism, however, this aestheticisation has adopted a different range of functions and expressions than in the modernist conception, because in postmodern society ‘traditional distinctions and hierarchies are collapsed’ (Featherstone, 2007: 92). Unlike in the 1920s, its aim is not ‘to efface the boundary between art and everyday life’ (Featherstone, 2007: 65), but to build up new distinctions in ‘the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society’ (Featherstone, 2007: 66).

As for formal features, in recent advertisements abstraction is found not as a flat composition of graphical or animated elements, but as a reduction of photographic images to a painterly arrangement of light and colour. However, the arrangement of the visuals based on music harks back to the concept of rhythm so central in the modernist avant-garde.

An additional aspect common to both periods of advertisement production is the use of notable art-film directors (Fischinger, Ruttmann, Richter in the 1920s) or art-house directors (Luhmann, Lynch, Wong Kar-wai in recent years), thus invoking specific cultural knowledge on the part of consumers. This addressing of consumers’ cultural literacy is especially obvious in Baz Luhrmann’s Chanel No 5 and ‘Australia Walkabout’ ads: they are linked in an inter-textual way to *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *Australia* (2008) respectively. Bruno Aveillan, who directed the Louis Vuitton ad, is well known only within advertising circles, and therefore does not elicit these associations.

At the centre of the following analysis is ‘Louis Vuitton – A Journey’, a commercial that shows the purest form of the aesthetic patterns typical for the recent development in lifestyle advertisements. It unreels a series of images from different places around the world and was shot on location in China, India and

France.⁴ Accompanied by guitar music composed by the Argentine Gustavo Santaolalla – who is known for his film scores for Alejandro González Iñárritu – it sets a quiet pace with a dreamlike quality. This quality is further enhanced by the lack of any sounds from the environments shown in the images. As I have noted elsewhere (Flückiger, 2001: 397) this absence of environmental sounds marks a detachment of the character from the world he or she inhabits, be it euphoric (as is often the case in American montage sequences) or dysphoric (as in nightmares or borderline experiences). In addition, there is no voice-over; instead, the commentary is transferred to intertitles in black or white that appear on the screen and weave thoughts about the sense and purpose of a journey in a poem-like fashion into the visuals:

What is a journey?
 A journey is not a trip.
 It is not a vacation.
 It is a process. A discovery.
 It is a process ...
 ... of self-discovery.
 A journey brings us face to face ...
 ... with ourselves.
 A journey shows us not only the world ...
 ... but how we fit in it.
 Does the person create the journey ...
 ... or does the journey create the person?
 The journey is life itself.
 Where will life take you?

LOUIS VUITTON www.louisvuitton.com

The text reflects what Louis Vuitton's journey campaign⁵ calls the 'core values' – inner wealth, tranquillity, self-reflection – as opposed to the trendy display of fashion. One of the most important features of the strategy is the lack of information about the product's properties, which are downplayed and displaced to a marginal role.

4. Personal message from Samuel Giblin of the advertising, marketing and public relations agency Ogilvy and Mather, 24 April 2009.

5. For notes and information on the campaign, see <http://journeys.louisvuitton.com> [accessed 14 April 2009]. In addition to the commercial, the campaign features photographs by Annie Leibovitz of celebrities like Sean Connery, Francis Ford Coppola and Sofia Coppola, Catherine Deneuve, Mikhail Gorbachev, Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf, and Keith Richards (photographs in high resolution at <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2008/louis-vuitton-in-climate-project-journeys>, accessed 14 April 2009).



Figure 1. *Depiction of the product.* Reproduced by permission of Ogilvy & Mather

The commercial consists of approximately 50 shots; the product is depicted in only four of them, with shallow depth-of-field showing no more than a fraction of the typical LV logo and pattern. As will be shown, this aesthetic forms part of the overall strategy.

In contrast to the brand's luxurious image, the commercial accounts for a simple life in nature or secluded from the stressful urban ambience behind windows and layers of haze or mist or rain. It breaks with the strategies formulated by marketing trainers such as Albert Heiser (2001), namely: attracting attention, telling a story, and/or differentiating the product.⁶

What is at work here is a visual language that relies heavily on connotation, as described by Barthes. These connotations underscore the intertitle's line of argumentation and address the sensory experience of the audience. A careful analysis of the style involved in the image construction reveals a homogenous pattern that can be described as a soft style. According to David Bordwell et al. (1985: 341), the soft style emerged and became the norm in the 1920s. It served generally to focus on 'the plane of interest, the figure in the foreground'. It was achieved by the use of 'soft-focus lenses, filters, diffusion of light sources' and other means, and 'owed a good deal to much older trends in still photography, whereby pictures were considered "artistic" and painterly if they had a blurry softness about them' (Bordwell et al., 1985: 342). The best known photographs

6. By sharing its aesthetic with many other ads for luxury brands as cited above, the goal of differentiation is obviously not fulfilled.

of the painterly tradition appeared in the journal *Camera Work* under the direction of photographer Alfred Stieglitz, with Edward Steichen's early work being a key example of this aesthetic (Stieglitz, 2008). D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is probably one of the earliest films to use this style, which served to enhance the romantic parts of the story. In the early 1930s, Josef von Sternberg pushed this style even further, placing layers of transparent or translucent material between the camera and the scene and applying a beautiful glow to the highlights by placing a silk stocking in front of the lens, thus underscoring the star's aura with a mystic quality.

One should keep in mind, however, that different technical means lead to different aesthetic results. In addition to the silk stockings mentioned above, diffusion was achieved by the use of smoke, by thin layers of grease on the lens or by specific fog filters (Salt, 1992; Smid, 2009). In contrast to shallow depth of field, it leads to a blurriness that affects the whole image, and it generates blooming highlights. So while depth-of-field separates the characters or objects from the background, diffusion engulfs everything and creates a hazy atmosphere where the figures merge with the environment. The soft style of the 1920s and 1930s usually combined a shallow depth of field – produced by open apertures or long focal lenses – with diffusion. In the Louis Vuitton commercial, we can observe a combination of the two. But only rarely is there a detachment of the human figure from the background. More often, the figures fuse with the space, in some cases so that they are hardly perceptible. Diffusion is not only caused by optical means, but also by a constant haze that fills the landscapes. Backlight from the sun glows behind the figures, dissolves the contrasts even further, and soaks the scenes in a warm, shimmery ambience. No harsh shadows are cast; most of the landscapes look temperate, but not hot. Deliberately overexposed, the sun-



Figure 2. *Haze*. Reproduced by permission of Ogilvy & Mather



Figure 3. *Backlight soaks the scene in a warm shimmery ambience.* Reproduced by permission of Ogilvy & Mather

beams create blooming highlights. Many shots are constructed in layers, with fore- and background out of focus. Some of them lack any sharpness; nothing can be identified, creating mere atmospheres that are pure screens for the viewer's imagination.

In film studies, there has been a longstanding and ideologically charged debate on the effects of selective depth of field. In his essay 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema' (1950), André Bazin opted for the use of deep focus and long takes to offer the spectator a deliberately ambiguous rendering of the events depicted, so that he or she might explore them independently. According to Bazin, shallow depth of field in conjunction with the use of montage pre-organises the cinematic material and guides the viewer's perception to a great degree. But the material discussed here is of a different kind. It does not direct the viewer's attention because it hides more than it shows. It thus serves as an anchor for individual associations, and is ambiguous rather than pre-structured.

In addition to the aesthetic features mentioned, there is often a blur towards the edge of the image, either caused by objects in front of the lens or added digitally in postproduction. Two of the most charged effects generated by the optical apparatus – *bokeh* and lens flares – play a major role in these images. *Bokeh*⁷ refers to a pleasing quality of the out-of-focus area where, due to spherical aberration, the circles of confusion create shiny spots of light. This effect has gained cult status and can be observed in almost all the commercials for luxury brands, thereby becoming a code for luxury itself. Lens flares, on the other hand, are an effect of rays of light which are scattered through refraction

7. See <http://www.luminous-landscape.com/essays/bokeh.shtml> for more information on the technical process that produces *bokeh* (accessed 16 April 2009).



Figure 4. *Blur*. Reproduced by permission of Ogilvy & Mather

and internal reflections in the lens, creating irregular, often circular or hexagonal light discs which move in complex patterns over the image as a whole. These flares are associated with warm temperatures and southern idyllic scenes with a romantic touch, as they are most often caused by sunlight. The Louis Vuitton ad uses both *bokeh* and lens flares to evoke a romantic and luxurious atmosphere.

Colours, too, add to a harmonious impression. They are organised in restricted colour schemes, or – as they are sometimes called – colour palettes. These restricted colour combinations make use of mostly monochrome compositions, only incidentally setting colour contrasts on small areas, and function as codifications of an exquisite taste, underlining the luxurious touch of the commodity. In fact, with one exception,⁸ all the commercials mentioned above clearly follow this strategy, as opposed to gaudy, screaming, and saturated colours for lower cost products.

In the Louis Vuitton advertisement, the colour scheme consists mainly of bluish, greenish and some light brown hues with a golden glint. Most of them are desaturated with a tendency to grey; sunlight is rendered in a bright yellow shade, and there are a few very striking red spots. With the exception of some sunlit images, most of them are rather dark or matte.

A valuable reference for discussing colour harmonies is the colour theory of Johannes Itten, a teacher at the Bauhaus. In his book *Kunst der Farbe* (*The Art of Colour*, 1970) he systemises the contrasts in seven categories: hue, light and dark, cool and warm, complementary, saturation, simultaneous/successive contrast, and proportion. Following this system, we can observe a predominance of

8. Unsurprisingly, Wong Kar-wai's 'There is Only One Sun' applies a scheme of very saturated colours because this commercial is a showcase for Philips LCD television sets. He still mostly restricts the colour scheme in each image to two carefully chosen hues.



Figure 5. *Bokeh*. Reproduced by permission of Ogilvy & Mather

light and dark contrasts with a combination of successive contrasts from blue to green, and – only in the shots that contain small spots of red – a contrast of proportion with complementary colours (green–red). Overall, blue hues dominate, with blue being the traditional colour of distance and nostalgia.⁹ Not only are subsequent shots held in similar hues, but the changes between them are also kept very subtle. If we were to translate the colour scheme to musical harmonies, we would notate it in a minor key with small intervals. In the Louis



Figure 6. *Contrast of proportion with red*. The fish on the right-hand side are the only red in the image. Reproduced by permission of Ogilvy & Mather

9. The association of blue with nostalgia was introduced in German romanticism by Novalis in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800). Its connection to distance – and possibly to nostalgia – relies on the fact that blue is perceived as more distant than red. Furthermore, this connection is enhanced by the bluish hue of haze which – due to Rayleigh scattering in the atmosphere – tints distant objects and the sky.

Vuitton commercial this colour harmony evokes a calm and nostalgic feeling by suppressing sharp contrasts and by the slow and careful development of the highly restricted colour scheme.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis has shown how sensorial and aesthetic qualities are emphasised to directly attract viewers of 'Louis Vuitton – A Journey' while at the same time remaining ambiguous and only vaguely associated with the product. In fact it is obvious that the ambiguous and style-driven displays of soft and blurred images are at the centre of the strategy.

Returning to Barthes's concepts established in the introduction, we can understand these works as triggering connotations and myths and – especially the stylistic patterns – as a 'third meaning' or, with Kristin Thompson (1999), as 'excess'. The connotations addressed in this commercial rely on a hegemonial reading that is grounded in a Western culture of achievement and success. Given this implied background of the audience, the vast majority of the images offer an alternative world situated in exotic places. It therefore plays out a dichotomy between the assumed everyday experience of restlessness in a fast and tough business world, and the pure and innocent but direct contact with the environment and its elements: water, earth, light and air.

On another level, the commercial depicts a form of travel that is set in sharp contrast to luxurious but thoroughly organised vacations in secluded and sterile resorts and hotels, thus calling on experiences that might have occurred in the younger, more adventurous days of a now successful audience stuck in conventions. These connotations go beyond subjective associations, but are culturally coded and – as such – intentionally evoked by the film-makers and the advertising agency. They form part of the so-called copy strategy, i.e. the campaign's specified objective (Schweiger et al., 2005: 222) to establish core values that are set in sharp opposition to modern urban life and consumerism. Samuel Giblin from the advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather has expressed this objective as follows:

The film was imagined and designed as a sensory road movie: [to] strike a deep personal chord in audiences worldwide, [to] make audiences sense the essence of travel, [to] focus not on places and their visual depiction but on their vibrant energy, [to] focus not on travellers but on experience, [to] focus not on products but on how they become true travel companions.¹⁰

10. Personal communication, 24 April 2009.

This objective is strongly underpinned by the intertitles that emphasise the interrelation between the traveller and his or her exploration of the environment. An additional element of this strategy is the unusual running time of the commercial in conjunction with its slow rhythm and the static images. The choice of the exceptional 90-second format enables Louis Vuitton to take the time to convey the true and enriching essence of travel as a process of both discovery and self-discovery. 'Time is the ultimate luxury' (as Antoine Arnault, Head of Communications at Louis Vuitton, wrote in the press release for the commercial).

While these arguments support the consumer benefit associated with the product, they do not answer the question of why and how the product fulfils the promise. There is clearly a gap between the added value expressed in the atmospheric images and the specific Louis Vuitton luggage. Hence the 'unique selling proposition' (Schweiger et al, 2005: 222) is not supported. As the statements cited above demonstrate, this gap is no coincidence, but part of a strategy that builds more on the third line of communication – namely 'tonality', ie the style and expression of the message – than on delivering arguments. In addition to the static, calm rhythm and the exotic touch, the tonality includes the stylistic patterns mentioned in the case study: shallow depth of field with *bokeh*, colour, over-exposure and diffusion. According to Featherstone (2007: 83), 'consumption, then, must not be understood as the consumption of use values, a material utility, but primarily as the consumption of signs.' These signs, however, are not rooted in the world depicted, but in the mode of depiction. While the referent is still available – the images represent something and their connection to the real is of high significance – the higher-order meaning or the symbolic value is transferred to the realm of style. This difference can best be explained by the distinction between 'looking through' and 'looking at', established in art theory. 'Looking through' refers to a transparent mode of depiction where the recognition of objects dominates. 'Looking at', on the other hand, means focusing on the material quality of the surface structure of a painting or a photograph. In this system the shift to the symbolic value of the signs occurs mainly in the 'looking at' mode of perception, while – in contrast to the abstract, modernist artworks of the avant-garde that were fully opaque and thus non-referential – the 'looking through' mode is equally available.

In her reflections on excess, Thompson (1999) discusses the foregrounding of style using Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's notions regarding the language of poetry. Indeed, with his concept of defamiliarisation or 'making strange' (*ostranenie*), Shklovsky [1916] (1965) emphasised the quality of difference in poetic language to ordinary forms of expression whereby the automated

perception process is interrupted, because the material and/or structure itself calls for attention, thus opening up a new perspective on the world. While this modernist approach to the tasks and functions of art is clearly expressed in the avant-garde films mentioned above, which reflect the material properties of their work, the case is different in the commercials discussed here. First of all, they mask their stylistic excess with a mimetic function associated with photography as proposed by Barthes, and therefore naturalise – at least to some degree – the aesthetic plethora. Secondly, they incorporate already-established stylistic devices in lieu of inventing new ones. In fact, these images can be regarded as a pastiche, using and interweaving styles from different historical sources and traditions in a postmodern attitude. In contrast to lifestyle advertisements from the 1980s and 1990s, where – according to Chaney (1996: 107) – the showcasing of stylistic craftsmanship was ‘used to both ironise and re-articulate discursive codes’, in the patterns discussed here this self-reflective mode is largely absent. There is a tighter coupling of style and perception rather than a distancing, playful exhibition of the spectacular. In other words, while the images in the Louis Vuitton ad are certainly spectacular, they understate this aspect and hide it behind their naturalised depiction of a simple life.

Yet, the presence of style – especially if it needs to be deciphered – calls for a specific activity on the part of the viewer, who tries to assign it a function, thus converting an implicit message into an explicit one. In his three-level model of filmic structures, Peter Wuss (1993) differentiates between perception-driven, conceptual and stereotype-driven structures. I would propose that it is exactly these perception-driven structures that are at work here. According to Wuss (1993: 13), they are hardly evident in the cinematic work, but gain their evidence only through compositional principles, most importantly repetition. Through intratextual recurrence these structures acquire meaning by triggering an auto-correlation process that leads the viewer to make assumptions on the basis of probability learning (Wuss, 1993: 57). Or, in other words, the homologue and thus similar layers of the third meaning actually develop significance on the basis of the inner coherence of the elements they combine. This mode of expression is related to the visual rhyming proposed by Hans Richter. It entails sequencing and variation as basic principles of the structuring process, namely by building inner relationships within the sensorial aspects of the images present. And it is precisely here that these contemporary commercials share a common ground with the European avant-garde of the early 20th century. When the visual arts began to work with abstraction, their proponents from Wassily Kandinsky to Paul Klee or Sergei Eisenstein, but also the avant-garde film-makers mentioned above, drew essential concepts from musical compos-

ition, which was considered the purest art form for expressing universal ideas detached from the mundane sphere of the palpable.

In part, the sensorial aspects of the commercial are purely visual, like the colours and the photographic properties mentioned in the analysis. Beyond the visual associations, the images express haptic qualities: warmth, softness and – importantly – water as a soothing element. Thus there is a multi-sensorial enhancement that informs the means of depiction as well as the content represented, and that supports the tight coupling of style and perception.

Within the theory of persuasion as discussed in the psychology of advertising, this dominance of style clearly addresses a peripheral route of information processing, as proposed by Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo (1986) in their elaboration likelihood model (ELM). I will not scrutinise this model in detail, but concentrate on the usefulness of a peripheral processing in this context. In contrast to the central route – based on a strong motivation of the advertisement's recipient, who carefully determines whether or not the arguments delivered are suited to his personal needs – the peripheral route does not need strong arguments, but relies on the distinctive function of style in postmodern society as outlined by Featherstone (2007: 66). This is certainly the case in the commercial analysed here, which relies almost entirely on the direct impact of the sensorial qualities and thus requires only low-effort processing and almost no cognitive evaluation of the content. Such a strategy is certainly adequate for low-involvement products. But the luxurious and expensive luggage by Louis Vuitton seems to call for a careful consideration of whether or not it is worth being bought; it is therefore a high-involvement product. Furthermore, peripheral processing only leads to a less enduring change of attitude, is



Figure 7. *Water as a soothing element*. Reproduced by permission of Ogilvy & Mather

less resistant to counterpersuasion, and less predictive of behaviour. Therefore it seems that in regard to this class of consumer goods it might be risky to employ the peripheral strategy should a potential client be persuaded. Most probably, however, this kind of advertisement does not aim at convincing broad segments of consumers, but addresses only a small group with a high financial potential. Thus it merely charges a product with a symbolic meaning this group of high achievers is missing in life.

This consideration leads us back to the above-mentioned dichotomy between a simple, innocent existence and the complex and demanding lifestyle of the target audience. While the avant-garde films combined a modernist hope for utopia with a democratisation of aesthetics and taste for the masses, contemporary lifestyle advertisements tend to be suffused with nostalgia. However, this nostalgia is ahistoric, offering only the most pleasurable aspects of an imaginary experience.

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